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BY

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"Our songs being finished we began our teeth to worke. We had there a kinde of rice, much like oats. It growes in the watter in 3 or 4 foote deepe. There is a God that shews himselfe in every countrey, almighty, full of goodnesse and y preservation of those poore people who knoweth him not. They have a particular way to gather up that graine. Two takes a boat and two sticks, by w^{ch} they gett y^{e} eare downe and gett the corne out of it. Their boat being full, they bring it to a fitt place to dry it; and that is their food for the most part of the winter, and doe dresse it thus: ffor each man a handfull of that they putt in the pott, that swells so much that it can suffice a man."[1] Thus wrote Pierre d'Esprit, Sieur Radisson, in 1668, for the information of Charles II, of England.

Wild rice, *Zizania aquatica*, is common throughout eastern North America, but is most abundant in the shallows of the Great Lakes region. It is also termed Indian, water, and wild oats and marsh rye. Although known to Linnæus,[2] it has never been extensively used, except by some tribes of North American Indians. It grows best from the rich, muddy, slimy bottoms of gently flowing streams or their expansions into marshy lakes. The stagnant water of swamps and the still water of small spring lakes do not seem to furnish its necessities. In scarcely moving water the stalks sometimes come up from a depth of ten feet or more, but this grass is commonly found in water from two to

[1] Radisson's *Fourth Voyage*, in Wis. Hist. Coll., vol. XI, p. 89.

[2] I. A. Lapham. *Grasses of Wisconsin*, in Trans. Wis. Agr. Society, 1853.

four feet deep. It often reaches a height of nine or ten feet and grows in a thick mass; the leaves are long, flat, and lanceolate; the panicle is pyramidal in form; the lower branches are spreading and staminate; the upper branches erect and pistillate. This unusual arrangement necessitates a reversal of the common method of fertilization. In wild rice the small grains of pollen are lighter than the surrounding atmosphere. So, on leaving the anther, instead of falling, as in most plants, they rise to come in contact with the stigmas and produce fertilization.[3] This variety of grass is exceedingly prolific. While found in many of the lakes and streams of northern Wisconsin, it does not grow in all of those which seem fitted for it. It can be sown in proper places with good results. It is an annual, the plant from the seed dropped in the fall coming up through the water in early June and at once putting forth its flower-stalk. It flowers in July and early August and reaches maturity in September. The seed is longer than that of common rice and is of a dark slate color. This plant is the *folles avoines* of the early French writers. Its harvest marked an important time in the Indian's year and preceded the great annual autumnal hunt. With the ancient village sites and the best hunting grounds, the rice fields were esteemed the most valuable tribal property and were vigorously defended.[4]

At the present day wild rice is an important item in the diet of the Ojibwa Indians of Wisconsin. The fields on Kakagon river, several miles from their village, are annually visited for the harvest. In the Ojibwa tongue August is Manominikegisiss, the "rice-making moon." About the first of this month these Indians prepare large quantities of cedar-bark rope or twine, using the inner bark torn into long, narrow strips, which are then tied together. This twine is rolled into a large ball for convenience in handling. Toward the middle of August, when the rice is in the milk, they visit the rice fields in their canoes. Two women usually work together. One paddles or pushes the canoe; the other sits or kneels, with her roll of cedar twine behind her, the end passing forward through a ring on her shoulder. This woman gathers as many rice-stalks as she can conveniently reach and fastens them together in a sheaf by passing her twine

[3] C. L. Flint. *Grasses and Forage Plants*, p. 89.
[4] W. W. Warren. *History of the Ojibways*, p. 222.

around the stalks just below the heads and tying it. This enables her later to gather a large harvest with less trouble, the sheaf being handled more easily and more securely than the loose stalks, and less grain is knocked into the water in the handling. The sheaves stand in rows just far enough apart to allow a canoe to pass between the rows.[5] After allowing them to stand about two weeks, the grain then being ripe, the women return in their canoes and harvest the crop. Formerly the heads were sometimes cut off with a knife and carried to the shore, but this could not be done to advantage when the seeds were ripe.

Some of the Indians, instead of using the twine, would formerly gather a handful of stalks and twist them together and downward, leaving the grain thus to ripen; they proceeded in this manner over a considerable district.[6] When they came later to gather the seed, each woman knew her own by some peculiarity of the twist, and the rights of this ownership were respected. Carver says that each family had its allotment and was able to distinguish it by the manner in which the sheaves were fastened.[7]

Father Marquette probably referred to this practice when he wrote: "They divide the ground whereon this wild rice grows, so that each one can reap his own separately without trespassing on his neighbor's patch."[8]

Sometimes the rice is harvested without the preliminary binding into sheaves. Two women work together sitting in the extremes of a canoe facing each other. The one at the rear is equipped with a long, light pole with which to push the canoe along, this pole being sometimes forked at one end to keep it from sinking too far in the muddy bottom of the stream. The woman at the bow holds two slender cedar sticks a trifle more than three feet in length. These sticks are 1¼ inches in diameter at the butt and taper almost to a point. They are specially prepared for this purpose and are used for none other. One of them is sometimes made with a curve or hook at one end. As the canoe is slowly pushed through the thickly grown stalks of rice, this woman bends the stalks over the canoe from one side with her curved stick and strikes the heads smartly with the

[5] Rev. C. Verwyst, O. S. F., in a personal letter.
[6] A. G. Ellis. *Recollections*, in Wis. Hist. Coll., vol. VII, p. 265.
[7] J. Carver. *Travels*, Phila. ed., 1784, p. 210.
[8] *Relations des Jésuites*, 1671. Québec ed., 1858, p. 39.

other stick, dislodging the grain and causing it to fall into the canoe. Reversing hands, she operates in the same way on the other side of the canoe. About a gill is detached at each blow. This operation is continued until the forward end of the canoe is heavily loaded and sinks deep in the water. Then the women exchange implements and duties, but keep their respective seats, and the direction of the canoe's movement is reversed. The work is resumed and is carried on until the other end of the canoe is also loaded, when the women push it to the shore and at once begin their preparations for drying and separating the rice. It is covered at this stage with an unusually tenacious husk, and has a beard about two inches long. When bound in sheaves the rice is gathered in the same manner. Usually, however, after the twine is slipped off the seed drops into the canoe on being shaken over it.[9]

The grain is dried in three ways. Some merely spread it on skins or blankets in the sun until it is thoroughly cured. The quickest process is that of parching a handful at a time in a kettle over the fire, but this method to some extent destroys the nutritive qualities of the grain. The common way is to build a light scaffold, called abwadjigan by the Ojibwas, about three feet from the ground. Upon it is placed a mat of basswood or cedar bark to hold the grain, and underneath a slow fire is built. Sometimes the scaffold is inclosed by a hedge or fence of green cedar branches to confine the heat and thereby quicken the drying process. The rice on the mat is turned or shaken from time to time, and it usually takes a day to dry a scaffoldful.

[9] O. T. Mason, *Origins of Invention*, p. 190, says: "Wherever savages have been visited in their native simplicity, they seem to have found out just how to garner the products of the plants in the best manner: . . . the Ojibwa woman paddles her canoe among the wild rice, and with a proper wand beats the seeds into a coarse mat spread on the bottom." Seed-gathering seems to have been conducted in much the same manner by many Indian tribes. See F. V. Coville, in Am. Anthropologist, vol. v, p. 354, on the *Panamint Indians;* G. B. Grinnell, *Story of the Indian*, p. 65, on the Mandans, Rees, and Pawnees. In *On the Border with Crook*, p. 131, Capt. J. G. Bourke says: "The Apache women place their conical baskets under the tops of the stalks of seed-bearing grasses, draw these down until they incline over the baskets, and then hit them a rap with a small stick, which causes all the seed to fall into the receptacle provided."

For separating the husk from the kernel a hole is dug in suitable ground, about a foot and a half deep and three feet in circumference. After the grain is dry four or five quarts of it are securely wrapped in a moose or deer skin or the modern substitute, a bag, and laid in the hole. The "stalwart brave" then treads on it until the husk is detached. This is considered hard work and its performance has always fallen to the man. At the present day a tub is sometimes substituted for the hole in the ground. After the husk is detached the grain is cleaned in the wind or by means of a birch-bark fan,[10] and is then ready for storage. Properly cured, it can be kept many years if stored in a dry place. It was formerly kept in boxes made of bark.[11] Carver says that the skins of fawns or young buffaloes were taken off nearly whole and sewed into sacks, in which the rice was stored until the next harvest.[12]

In preparing rice for the table the simplest method is that of boiling it in a kettle. It is always cooked unground and usually without seasoning. Cooked into a paste it is used as a substitute for bread. The broth of meat and fish is also thickened with it. It is very nourishing; an acre of wild rice being said to furnish about as much nutriment as an acre of wheat. Rev. Chrysostom Verwyst, O. S. F., of the Odanah Reservation mission, writes: "Wild rice is very palatable, and the writer and his spiritual children prefer it to the rice of commerce, although it does not look quite so nice. I am very fond of it."[13] The Mississagua Indians parched rice until it burst like popcorn, and their hunters and fishermen used it in this form when away from home. They commonly used it in soups or stews.

Father Dablon, in the Relation of 1671, says: "The fat of the buffalo mixed with wild oats makes the most delicate dish of this country."[14] Another mixture was a whole partridge, picked and pounded to jelly, boiled in rice.[15] At a later day a favorite

[10] The Mississagua Indians clean rice by shaking it in a basket. See A. F. Chamberlain in Jour. Am. Folk-Lore, vol. I, p. 150.

[11] *Relations des Jésuites*, 1663, p. 19.

[12] Op. cit., p. 210.

[13] In Wis. Hist. Coll., vol. XIII, p. 429.

[14] Page 44.

[15] J. D. Doty. *Northern Wisconsin in 1820*, in Wis. Hist. Coll., vol. VII, p. 199.

dish was composed of wild rice, corn, and fish boiled together.[16] It is also served with maple syrup and with cranberries. It swells greatly when put into the water. A small handful is enough for the meal of a large family.[17]

In addition to being an important article of food for himself and his family, wild rice served the Indian of former days in another way. It attracted vast numbers of wild fowl of every sort, and thus brought to him another great food-supply. The fondness which these birds evince for wild rice is well known, and to this day in northern Wisconsin they can be found in considerable numbers only on waters where it abounds. The accounts of early travelers fairly teem with descriptions of the vast quantities of birds to be seen hovering around the *Zizania* and the ease with which they might be killed. The birds were in the finest condition after feeding on the rice, "inexpressibly fat and delicious." The rice not only served as a decoy, but also as a blind the Indian easily concealing himself in its thick masses and sometimes being able to kill the birds with a club.

Although gathered somewhat in the milk, wild rice is harvested mainly in September. The harvest lasts but a few days, as, when fully ripe, the seed is detached at the slightest touch. Even a strong wind for a day or two will sometimes shake all the grain into the water. The binding into sheaves above described to some extent lessens the risk of loss from this cause. It was formerly customary to gather enough to last through the winter, the amount being about five bushels for each family. Some of the more industrious women gathered as much as twenty-five bushels, using the surplus in trade. The Ojibwas of today gather about one hundred pounds for an average family.

Peltries, maple sugar, and rice were the commodities offered for sale by the Ojibwa of seventy years ago. In 1820 a bushel sack of rice was valued at two skins, the price of a large, prime beaver pelt.[18] At the present day this grain may be bought at stores in some of the cities of northern Wisconsin.

[16] J. W. Biddle, in Wis. Hist. Coll., vol. I, p. 63.

[17] An intelligent half-blood of the Odanah reservation writes me in relation to the nutritive qualities of rice: "Fill the stomach real full and then lay down. It keeps from hunger. Not strongly nutritious, it produces great rest and sleep to men, while women work."

[18] J. D. Doty, op. cit.

The value of wild rice to the Wisconsin Indians of early days can scarcely be estimated.[19] They were barely beginning to turn their attention to agriculture.[20] The abundance of this crop, the ease with which it was harvested and transported to their homes, and the facts that it required no labor in preparing the ground and no care while coming to maturity rendered it easily their most important vegetable food. It was one of their staples of subsistence, far more important to them than corn.[21]

There were two centers of Indian population in the district that is now Wisconsin—one along the southern shore of Lake Superior, well toward its western end, and the other in Fox River valley. The first was composed chiefly of Ojibwa, and the latter of Menomini, Potawatomi, Sauk and Fox, Mascoutin, Miami, and Kikapu, in straggling order. Both regions were very good for fishing and fair for the hunting of large game, but undoubtedly the prime cause of the location of the Indian villages was the great crops of wild rice to be obtained in each place with the outlay of little labor.[22] The immense acreage and the dense growth insured a bountiful harvest to every one who was willing to work. In some parts of Fox river this grain grew so densely that passages for boats had to be cut through it, and in one place it spread over an area five miles long by two miles wide.[23] When we read of one small lake which would furnish a supply for 2,000 Indians, and then realize that this region was full of lakes and streams choked with wild rice, it comes forcibly upon us that here in truth was an Indian paradise.

[19] See Warren, op. cit., pp. 40, 156, and 175; Parkman, *La Salle*, etc., p. 52, note; Newberry in Pop. Sci. Monthly, vol. XXXII, p. 39.

[20] See Marquette, *Relation*, 1671; also Warren, op. cit., p. 40. For general discussion, see the admirable chapter on Aboriginal America in E. J. Payne's *History of America*, vol. I.

[21] Rev. C. Verwyst in a personal letter. My half-blood friend also writes: "It is presumed to have been the main source of food outside of meat, maple sugar, and fish." See also *Relations*, 1658, p. 21.

[22] S. S. Hebberd. *Wisconsin under French Dominion*, p. 36.

[23] G. W. Featherstonhaugh. *Voyage up the Minnay-Sotor*, p. 184.